LONGFELLOW'S RED GLARE, HOLMES BURSTING IN AIR

By Harold M. Harvey

Give Proof, as It Were, That Our Flag Is Still There. How Long It Will Be There, However, Is Another Question if Something Is Not Done, and Speedily, to Curb the Pernicious Influence of Our Best Beloved Poets. We Are Still Midnight-Riding with the Late Paul Revere, Still Firing Shots-Heard-Round-the-World with Those Embattled Farmers

NO ONE who has ever gone to school in the United States would, at first thought, consider Henry W. Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph Waldo Emerson or the rest of the well known rhyming contributors to McGuffey's Third Reader as anything if not the most ardent patriots. All of us who have had to "stay after school" because we could not learn "by heart" their inspired tributes to the Minute Men, to the revered Paul and his midnight message, and to other storied heroes, could ever doubt their love of native land.

Yet this very pride in the nation's fathers so sincerely presented in their poems has made them, unwittingly, to be sure, enemies of their country's welfare. On the foundation stone of tradition, cut and polished by their verses, they have founded a cult which, because of its almost universal acceptance by the American public, has resulted in a most appalling lack of preparedness to defend our persons and our property. After reading all our lives how our forefathers stepped forth at a minute's notice to drive invaders from our shores, we have come to believe that our country can never be defeated by arms, and that an unorganized soldiery, by merely shouting "Boo!" can drive off all the hosts of Europe.

Although we readily admit that our regular army can in no way compare with the standing armies of the Continent, coached by our patriotic poets we meet all arguments with the fact that our active militia has always jumped into the breach and saved the day in time of need. Just as the Minute Men stood ready to defend the people of the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1775, we rest content that there will ever be brave souls who will turn the tide of war when it beats against our gates.

In his poem "Lexington" Oliver Wendell Holmes writes:

"Slowly the mist o'er the meadows was creeping,
Bright on the dewy buds glistened the sun,
When from his couch, while his children were sleeping,
Rose the bold rebel and shouldered his gun.
Hushed was his parting sigh,
While from his noble eye
Flashed the last sparkle of liberty's fire."

There's preparedness for you! The Minute Man goes peacefully to bed on the evening of April 18, 1775. Along toward daylight Paul Revere rides by, shouting: "Come on, lads, the redcoats are coming! Get your guns, and we'll show them if they can tamper with Americans."

He calmly rises, kisses his wife and sleeping babies, gets down his old musket from the hook and unconcernedly goes forth to do battle at the bridge.

In contrast, consider a militia man of to-day. At 3 o'clock some morning he is roused by a telephone message which informs him that a hostile fleet has landed at Coney Island and is advancing on New York. Would he don his uniform and snatch up his gun, even if he had them with him, and dash by subway to the Brooklyn Bridge, there to resist the enemy's invasion? If he did, would there be a poet left alive in this broad land to write stanzas in praise of the splendid victory such as Emerson wrote in his "Concord Hymn":

"By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled;
Here the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world."

The militiamen of to-day are not farmers. They are keen, active guardsmen, who have drilled once each week for a long time; and yet what would the result be if they should step in a moment from private life into the ranks? Most of us have never stopped to think of that. When we have thought about it at all we have remembered that such a transformation has been successfully accomplished many times in the history of our land. We can quote no less authority than John Greenleaf Whittier (and who could doubt his word?):

"Swift as their summons came they left
The plough mid-furrow standing still,
The half-ground corn grist in the mill,
The spade in earth, the axe in cleft.

"They went where duty seemed to call,
They scarcely asked the reason why;
They only knew they could but die,
And death was not the worst of all."

Although Whittier has exposed himself to condemnation by making us believe that militiamen could march to victory at the drop of the hat, he saves himself somewhat by the second stanza. In it he expresses, in a mild degree, the feeling of present-day army officers.

In a recent speech on preparedness General Leonard Wood, commanding the Eastern Department, said: "We officers of the army and navy are looked upon sometimes as extremists and as professional fanatics, but we are not so. We do not want to see your sons and your young men thrown into war, willing, but unprepared and unready. Such a procedure is simply murder; not only murder, but wanton murder, because it can only result from deliberate neglect and failure to heed conditions which exist to-day, and to take heed from the lessons of all time. It is gross and brutal disregard of human life."

When Longfellow burned midnight oil to give publicity to the midnight message of Paul Revere he did more than to put the engraver's name in the mouth of every schoolboy and to get an amusement beach called for him. He laid himself bare to the accusation of being the man who has done more to injure the preparedness for defence of the present generation than any other of the New England poets. In the last lines of "Paul Revere's Ride" he offers a prophecy, a bald assumption, which may force us who read it to run, if ever we are attacked:

"Borne on the night wind of the past,
Through all our history to the last,
THE PEOPLE WILL WAKEN AND LISTEN TO HEAR
The hurrying hoofbeats of that steed
And THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE OF PAUL REVERE."

If Longfellow believed what he wrote, he did not know the American people. In the well-ordered quiet of his Cambridge study he slumbered on, little realizing that three-quarters of us would never get to business on time if it were not for our alarm clocks, and that most of us depend on a repeating alarm, at that.

There are dozens, yes, hundreds, of Paul Reveres who have been trying to waken us for years, but we have slept on, waiting for some one to come and shake us, if need be, but peaceful in the belief that we would be called at the proper time. Rushing madly after our own particular interest, we have no time for any midnight message, unless it be a telegram or one over a telephone. We have not cared whether the country was prepared for war. Nothing less than a Black Tom explosion would stir us, and then we would roll over in bed and say to ourselves: "Another subway cave-in! Oh, pshaw! I'll go to sleep again. There will be some one else there to help, if help is needed."

Before the Civil War Paul Revere was sending out daily warnings, and yet not until Sumter was fired on did the North awake. In '98 we slept as peacefully as infants until the Maine was blown up in Havana Harbor. No wide-awake interest was shown in the recent Mexican crisis until men had been murdered in the raids on Columbus. Drugged by the poisonous soothing syrup brewed on the hearths of peaceful old New England poets, we have drowsed in happy contentment.

But we knew that some one would cry out to us as Park Benjamin did on the eve of the last war with Mexico:

"Arm! Arm! Your country bids you arm!
Fling out your banners free!
Let drum and trumpet sound alarm
O'er mountains, plain and sea.

"March onward from th' Atlantic's shore
To Rio Grande's tide;
Fight as your fathers fought of yore!
Die as your fathers died!

"So vindicate your country's fame,
Avenge your country's wrong!
The sons should own a deathless name
To whom such sires belong.

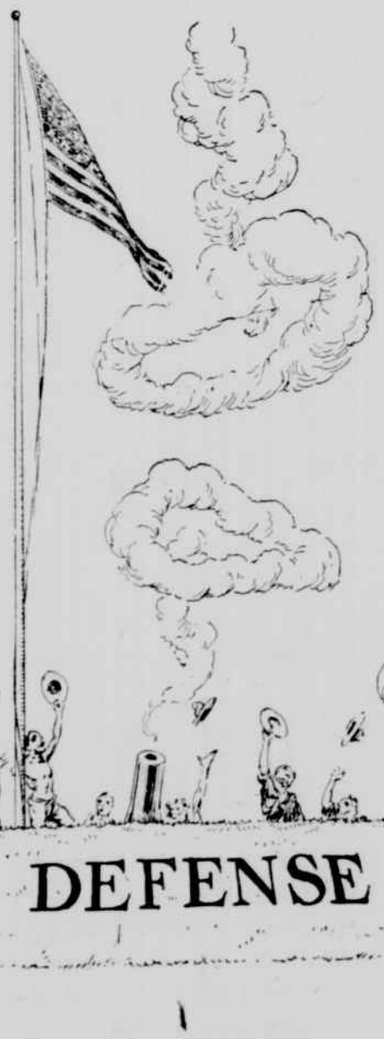
"To arms! To arms! Ye men of might;
Away from home! Away!
The first and foremost in the fight
Are sure to win the day."

And, of course, we would be the first and foremost! In our patriotic literature, like eloping brides in "movie" thrillers, we can never escape our fathers. We must always fight as they fought and die as they died. As a matter of fact, if we did fight as they fought we would be very sure to die as they died--and much sooner. Our deathless names would have to be sought in the numbered identification tags on some desolate battlefield, and there would be so many of us that the search would not be an easy one.

This praise of the deathless name is another failing of our poets. They flirt with it, they tease it into life, and then they romp with it through yards of spondees or dactylics, leading us on into the maze until we believe that glory, gratis, awaits every man who rushes to the colors.

"Come, ye lads who wish to shine
Bright in future story;
Haste to arms and form the line
That leads to future glory.
Beat the drum, the trumpet sound,
Manly and united;
Danger face, maintain your ground
And see your country righted."

The tremendous harvest of this type of poem that is gathered into the granary of our literature each time that we engage in war, or even talk of it, has led us to look on war as a sort of tremendous Hippodrome spectacle. There is nothing terrible about it, or the bards could not use it as the subject for their pretty verses. To us it means uniforms, bands, flags, the sun flashing on steel, the tramp of many feet. How splendid the regiments looked as they paraded down Fifth Avenue on their way to entrain for the border! How safe we felt as we saw them, after a week's mobilization, marching off to defeat Carranza's hordes! And how the very sight of them inspired hundreds of us to enlist!



In a time of desperate need we ourselves, again like our fathers, might volunteer to defend our country. Untrained, unorganized, but loyal and brave, we would march along, singing, as some unknown poet sang in the Sixties:

"We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more,
From Mississippi's winding stream and from New England's shore;
We leave our ploughs and workshops,
Our wives and children dear,
With hearts too full for utterance,
With but a silent tear.
We dare not look behind us, but steadfastly before,
We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more."

Poets don't consider the months of work and training necessary to fit a newly recruited man for the battle line. "Willingness and money," to again quote General Wood, "are not in themselves sufficient without the element of time. Preparation for war requires a great deal of time, and it requires a tremendous amount of organization. We cannot take a million or two of men, despite the splendid promise of a former great statesman, and make them soldiers between daylight and dark. It would mean the destruction of tens of thousands of men, and certainly the ruin of the nation that depended upon that kind of preparation.

"War is not a matter of getting a certain number of men together in these days and putting arms in their hands and having a band march them out of town. War is opposing the organized might of a nation against the organized strength of your own, and you cannot do this in a happy-go-lucky way. War is of all games the one in which team work counts, and yet you expect us to put into the field a million or more men and have them ready in a few days. We cannot accomplish the training and organization necessary to meet conditions of modern war without time. Spread-eagleism and hot air are not a secure foundation for national defence."

Next to the question of organization the matter of equipment looms largest. The recent mobilization was delayed, in some cases several weeks, because men could not be furnished with the necessary clothing and arms. Although the same difficulty was experienced in '98, we had forgotten the fact. Instead, we have remembered William Henry Venable's poem, "Battle Cry," of May 1, that year, in which he lives up to his poet's reputation by telling us:

"With musket and haversack ready are we
To tramp the globe over, to sweep every sea,
From the isles of dead Philip to Florida's Key.

"We think of the Maine and our hot bosoms swell,
And then we are ready to storm gates of Hell!"

To Mr. Venable the men of 1898 and those of 1775 are the same. They both could pick up their muskets, lightly toss a haversack containing a bite of lunch over their shoulders and defy the world. They did not need uniforms, field pieces, horses or other equipment. On an empty stomach they could "storm gates of Hell!"

The hypnotic spell which has drawn a veil over the eyes of the American people has not been cast alone by our more recent poets. They found plenty of examples for their exaggerated and thoughtless enthusiasm in the first contributions to American literature.

In 1774 Joseph Warren, pleading for a free America, gazed into the future and uttered a prophecy that is still a long way from being fulfilled:

"Lift up your heads, ye heroes,
And swear with proud disdain,
The wretch that would ensnare you
Shall lay his snares in vain;
SHOULD EUROPE EMPTY ALL HER FORCE
WE'LL MEET HER IN ARRAY,
And fight and shout and shout and fight
For North America."

With regard to the books to which our poets have so copiously, if not freely, contributed, Frederick L. Huidekoper, author of "The Military Unpreparedness of the United States," says:

"Our school books are almost invariably incorrectly written. There is scarcely one—and I have examined a great many—which tells the truth of our military history. It is very natural, I suppose, and certainly a much more agreeable task, to depict victory and brilliant success than it is to chronicle disaster and failure, but it is high time that the American people knew the unvarnished truth about their military history. Unflattering though it may be to our national pride, few Americans realize that the United States has never been engaged in a war, except that with Spain, in which it has ever employed less than two soldiers to every one used by its adversary. Indeed, in one instance, the Florida war, we had under arms thirty times as many men as did our opponents."

Mr. Huidekoper and General Wood are Paul Reveres of our own day. Their message is not a midnight one, telling us that the enemy is marching down upon us; rather it is an eternal one, warning us to prepare for the foe that may descend upon us at any moment.